

## Yosemite and the Sierra Nevada

California is not exactly the best place for fall color splendor. However the Sierras have some awesome displays. My college mate Divya and her husband Deepak were joining us too. Both Deepak and Dilip had been to Yosemite before. But for us wives, it was the first trip. Until the last moment, we were undecided about when to make the trip. Finally considering the weather conditions and the peak of Fall Colors in the areas we were travelling to, we planned the trip for the weekend of 20-21 October.



We woke up at about 4am on Saturday morning. We had done most of our packing the previous night. So we just had to get ready and have some food, before Divya and Deepak came to pick us up. Then I remembered that I had forgotten to send out a survey for my MBA class project. The assignment was due on Tuesday. So early in the morning, I sent out requests to my friends and family in the US, updated my Orkut profile with the survey link (cant beat that publicity!) and pasted the link in as many Orkut communities I could, related to the keywords 'Indian' and 'USA'. Phew!

Divya & Deepak came to pick us up from Berkeley at about 5:30am with the SUV Deepak had rented from South Bay. We loaded up and set out. The first stop was the Hertz (car rental company) office at Oakland Airport, to get Dilip added on as an additional driver. That done, we made our way to Yosemite.

On the way, we stopped at a few vista points, noting that it was getting chillier with every stop. We stopped for gas. Dilip and Deepak got busy filling up the vehicle while Divya and I got busy with our cameras. The fall colors were getting prettier as we progressed. Along the way we learnt that Tioga Pass (on the east end of Yosemite Park was closed due to snow). We were dismayed because that pass was vital for us to get to the Sierra Nevada side, where we were staying the night.

Soon I took over from Deepak as the navigator while Dilip continued as the driver. We stopped a little before the entrance to the **Yosemite National Park** to take snaps with the huge entrance sign as the background. That point also had a convenient stand for taking snaps (how very thoughtful of them). So we took our first timed photo here. |



At the park, a ranger informed us that Tioga Pass had been opened. We welcomed the news! Inside the park, we began stopping randomly to capture the colors. Wow! The colors were awesome. I had never seen this phenomenon before. It was fascinating to drive along, with yellow, gold, brown and red, flashing by. From an elevation, the view of the Yosemite Valley was beautiful. It looked like an artist's palette as he mixed hues of yellow.



We stopped at a vista point to shoot Yosemite's famous Half Dome Mountain from a long distance. We chose a vantage point and were leisurely taking snaps individually, as couples etc. We must have got on the nerves of a British family who came after us. They tactfully and politely offered to take a snap of our group. What easier way to get a group of shutterbugs out of the way? Or maybe it was because he wanted us to take a snap of their group. Anyway, we owe a good snap to him.

Our next stop was a lake that looked the epitome of placidity, fringed with yellows and browns. We took quite a few snaps at the small shallow lake. Snaps of Dilip at this location were better than mine. I like to think it is because I am a better photographer! ;)



We then drove on to El Capitan, one of the largest monoliths in the world. El Capitan (Spanish for 'The Captain') is a favorite among rock climbers. El Capitan was also shaped by glacial action, as were most of the mountains in Yosemite National Park. There was some nice color at the bottom of El Capitan. There was also a grove of Oaks nearby. The play of light among the trees was captivating.

As we drove on, we saw a sign that read '**Sentinel Beach**'. A beach? At this altitude? We stopped to take a look. It turned out to be a kind of dried up lake. But the lake bed had white loose sand like that of a beach. The setting was lovely, owing to the white sand, the yellow leaves and contrasting grey rock cliffs.

Our growling stomachs insisted that we stop for lunch. We found the Park Store. I looked around for a souvenir while the others enquired about food. We had to spend some time there, thanks to my indecision and the long queues at the checkout. After a little bit of hunting, parking and re-parking, we found our way to deli sandwiches. As the restaurant was crowded we couldn't find place to sit inside. So we ate at the picnic benches outside. It was a little cold but the food was enough to quiet us.



After lunch, we stopped at the sign that said **Yosemite Falls**. It was an easy 1 mile round trip hike to the falls from the parking lot. Prior to arrival at Yosemite I had read that the all falls at Yosemite this time of the year, would be a running nose. But we weren't prepared for what we saw- it was bone dry! Quite disappointing. I made a mental note to return to Yosemite in May when all the falls are spectacular and in full force.

The long and colorful drive to **Glacier Point and Half Dome Mountain** was next on the agenda. On the way, we stopped at a vista point that Dilip claimed was a classic shot of the valley. The Indians used to periodically burn down all the trees in the valley (I forgot the reason), resulting in a wide clear valley. The place was so crowded that we had to vie for a frame. Tourists were arriving by the bus load. After a while I began to doze off in the navigator seat. (Can't blame me. Filling lunch, nice drive). Whoever had named Half Dome Mountain had appropriately done so. It looked just as if God had cut it with a butter knife and had half of the mountain with his bread! I never imagined that glaciers could be such great sculptors.



On our way back from Glacier Point, Deepak suggested that we stop at '**Taft Point**'. It was a moderate 2.2mile roundtrip hike from our car. The trail had many deep fissures, some even reaching all the way down to the valley floor. The trail ended in a very deep gorge. There was



almost no protection at the edge. Deepak said that heights made him dizzy the last time he was there and cautioned us to stay away from the edge. The rest of us were curious and wanted to look down. Soon, as per Deepak's suggestion, we were all on our stomachs, peering down at valley below. We even saw another tourist throw a plank over the edge. As we watched, the plank bounced off the edges multiple times and disappeared into the depths below. I took this snap of Dilip peering down the edge.

After Taft Point, we decided to leave Yosemite Park. It was already 5pm and we had to drive all across the park towards Sierra Nevada. We were staying the night at Mammoth Lakes, a town with many lodges and ski-resorts. Apparently, the mountains in winter are pretty popular among skiers.

We made our way out of Yosemite, through **Tioga Pass**. The route was beautiful and I especially noted a large lake with a perfect reflection of the mountains. But darkness was closing in rapidly and it wasn't worth stopping along the way. The Tioga Pass road was winding. Dilip was at the wheel as he said he preferred to drive. Deepak had a slight neck sprain and so the arrangement suited them both fine! I, as usual fought with sleep in the navigator seat.

**Mammoth Lakes** is a quaint old town with a European touch to it. We agreed it would be a better idea to finish dinner before we hit '*Austria Hof*', our lodge for the night. As Deepak had been to these parts before, he led us to a Thai restaurant. The food was good and the service was fast. We asked the lady at the counter for directions to *Austria Hof*. She gave us crystal clear directions. But unknown to us then, she was giving us directions to '*Alpen Hof*', another lodge. (*Hof* is the German term for farmhouse/courtyard). We suspected the mistake as use as we saw the signboard for *Alpen Hof*. But we decided to drive further to see if the same road would hit Austria Hof as well. Four miles up the hill, we reached a settlement complex that was

the base to the Mammoth Mountain. Save a lone young wolf that darted across the road, there was no sign of life at all. Finally we located human life and got directions to *Austria Hof*.

There was no one at the reception desk at Austria Hof. I don't blame them. Such a quiet small town. As previously arranged, our keys were at the front desk though. We retired for bed with the last part of Ocean's 11 playing on TV. The next day morning, we trooped down for the lodge's complimentary breakfast. They had cereals, bagels, boiled eggs, fruits, juice, flavored yogurts and the like. We filled our plates and climbed back up to eat breakfast over some Tom Hanks movie.

We started the day's sightseeing with a massive **earthquake fault line** in the Inyo forest. God and his knife yet again! This time, he must have used something sharper than a butter knife. The opposite edges of the fault line matched in ruggedness and looked as if the earth was torn apart there. With abundant Earthquakes and Volcanoes, California sure is an interesting place to be! As I write this, I hear about a wildfire raging in San Diego. What next, I wonder!



We then drove south of Mammoth Lakes to Lake Mary and a few other smaller lakes. There were no fall colors in those areas, but there was snow around the lakes.



The drive along the **Mammoth Lake Scenic Loop** was disappointing. It wasn't scenic at all. Just some scraggly dressed evergreen conifers along the roadside. Not dense at all. They looked like an unruly motley crowd of people approaching the road. I am sure the route must be scenic in winter when the ground is covered in snow. The only highlight of that drive was a **volcanic crater**. A half mile hike ended in a crater that was filled with jade colored water at the bottom. On the way back along the trail to the car, I stopped to pick up some pine cones. I have plans to paint them and use them as Christmas decorations. It must be the 'Amma-effect'. She would go to any lengths for some of those. I guess I must be a chip off the old block! Dilip reluctantly picked a few tiny ones for me. Deepak and Divya collected some too.

June Lake Loop had good displays of fall colors. Though most of this area was past the prime or fall colors, there were patches of brilliant yellow and gold. As Divya remarked, we in California chase after fall colors while it is a more common phenomenon along the east coast. Towards the end of the June Lake Loop, the terrain became barren and gray. But a sudden flash of yellow between the gray landscape resembled a tongue of fire.



The next stop was **Mono Lake**. Many surrounding lakes drained into this large lake. But Mono Lake has no outlets. This factor coupled with evaporation made the Mono Lake waters very salty. The lake brochure encouraged us to taste the waters. We did. Trust us, it is salty! It was interesting to see 'Tufas' rise out of the water. **Tufas** are formed by deposits of calcium



carbonate, which is formed when underground fresh spring water comes in contact with the salty lake water. The Tufas were amazing. Dilip was bent over the water edge, to try and spot Brine Shrimps which were supposed to be abundant in the lake. The son of oceanographers, he was obsessed with the lake ecology- the algae on the Tufa formations and the millions of small buzzing flies that feed on the algae. We decided that this will be the ideal place to bring Mummy and Pappa to.

We couldn't hold hunger at bay anymore. So we stopped for lunch at Lee Vining, a town smaller than Mammoth Lakes. It had only one restaurant open. The food portions they served were huge. Dilip and I couldn't finish what we ordered and had it boxed.

After lunch, I began nodding off (again in the navigator seat), on the way to **Bodie Ghost Town**. The route was a barren desert anyway, with a single green patch where hundreds of sheep herded by a shepherd and his dogs, were feeding. Bodie was a prominent Gold mining town in the 1880s during the California Gold Rush period. It was notorious for being lawless. During its heyday, it had a number of salons and even a Chinatown and a red light area. The weather is extreme with very hot summers and snow covered winters. With the onset of World War II, the gold mines were shut down and the last of the people abandoned Bodie. Today, Bodie stands alone on the Eastern slopes of the Sierra, a mere Ghost Town. Some of the houses are open to inspection by tourists. Almost all of them can be peered into through the windows. The setting inside these houses has been maintained as naturally as possible. It was surprising that a lot of personal artifacts were left behind by the residents. Hence the houses, school, church, bars, hotels, gymnasium and morgue looked like it had just been temporarily abandoned. The state of things inside these wood houses reminded me of the 'Arapera' in my father's ancestral home. It was nice to see belongings actually used by people many years ago. Peering through the windows, it was fun to imagine what the place looked like in action, with people moving about. It brought back memories of looking through the windows of my mother's paternal home as Amma pointed out the room where so-and-so used to sit, the dining table that they used to run around as children etc.



Bodie was the last stop on our tour and it was time to head back home via the Sonora Pass. The roads of this pass were more winding than that at Tioga Pass and we climbed up to an elevation of around 9250ft. At one point a deer darted in front of the car before us, totally scaring the lady driver. We reached Berkeley at about 9:30pm and after a short stopover, Deepak and Divya headed for their home in Cupertino. We finished our leftover boxed lunch and some food that was remaining and hit bed soon.

That was the end of another fun trip, the main purpose of which was to enjoy Fall Colors!